

HOUSE CONSIDERS THE DISTRICT BILL

Local Items Made the Subject of Discussion.

REFORMATORY SITE ASSAILED

Representative Gardner Explains the Measure—Increase of Commissioners' Salary Defeated by Point of Order—Settlement Expected of Electric Light Question.

Consideration of the District appropriation bill in the House of Representatives yesterday provoked lively debate. The first contest was over a proposed increase of salary for the District Commissioners from \$5,000 to \$6,000 per annum. Mr. Gardner, in charge of the bill, said the committee had endeavored to follow the law and to be as economical as possible. The appropriation was the largest ever proposed for the purpose, but he cited the steady reduction of the floating debt, which, he said, would soon be eliminated altogether. It had been cut down from \$1,000,000 some years ago, to \$300,000. He explained in detail what he termed the "public utility" feature, the proposed establishment of an asphalt plant. Formerly two or more concerns would engage in competitive bids for the asphalt work; but the two companies, formerly rivals, had combined, and it was deemed expedient to vest the Commissioners with discretion to utilize a large stone quarry in the establishment of a plant.

The provision was guarded by proper limitations and would, it was believed, prove a measure of economy. The Commissioners were also vested with authority to take entire charge of the street sweeping should they deem it expedient, instead of contracting for a part of the work. The committee believed that the proposed plan would yield better service and at less expense. In framing the bill the committee, he said, had been governed by the desire to get the best results and by economical means.

Reformatory Site Is Criticized.

Mr. Gardner next explained the establishment at Occoquan of the reformatory, stating that it was located about thirty miles down the river on a tract of land acquired for that purpose. He next described the Belvoir tract and the proposal to locate a reformatory there. The committee had visited the site, about six and one-half miles down the river.

Mr. Driscoll, of New York, deemed it unfortunate that public sentiment had been outraged in the location of a reformatory so near Mount Vernon.

Mr. Gardner explained the topography of the site, saying there was a ledge—quite an elevation—intending to exclude the view of the prison from Mount Vernon. Further, an inlet or bay protruded into the land, thus compelling persons who travel by land to go around some distance from Mount Vernon. In answer to questions by several members Mr. Gardner stated that the site had been finally acquired, and the money paid. He said that within three-quarters of a mile of the Capitol were located an almshouse, a workhouse, and a jail; also a small post office; yet, there were no inconveniences, no complaints because of the proximity of these places. He said the proposed structure at Belvoir would be located at the extreme southern part of the site, farthest from Mount Vernon and from Washington.

Mr. Gardner explained that the warden of the jail is appointed by the President, while the present warden or superintendent is appointed by local authority. It was proposed in the bill to consolidate and have but a single warden for these institutions if the divided authority on the power of appointments could be reconciled. All the male inmates of the workhouse had been removed, and the female would follow as soon as proper accommodations shall be provided. It was believed that about \$25,000 could be saved by the proposed consolidation.

The Electric Light Question.

Mr. Gardner explained the details of the electric light question. He said the present Commissioners had ascertained that the District had been for nine years paying for electric lights under a contract for 1,000 candlepower, when only 50 candlepower was actually supplied. The matter was referred to the electric power company, whose representative had replied in substance that better lights were provided. He said a former Commissioner had pronounced the system of lighting a "hoax" and had been treated for it. He said he expected the present Commissioners, who had nothing to do with the contract, to effect a settlement with the Potomac Electric Company, and he believed a fair adjustment had been or would be made.

Another provision of the bill Mr. Gardner specially urged was one authorizing the superintendent of the Capitol to turn over to the District, property, machinery, etc., which can be made useful by the local government. Under existing law the superintendent is required to sell such property as may not be required at the Capitol, and usually get the material at "old junk" prices. The bill authorizes this transfer, and requires a careful accounting for all property thus transferred.

Commissioners' Salary Discussed.

Mr. Gardner made a special plea in behalf of the proposed increase of salary for the District Commissioners. He said that when the organic law went into effect the population was but 170,000 and the revenues \$2,000,000. Population and revenues have increased, and the duties devolving upon the Commissioners are made more exacting and arduous. Mr. Gardner said that during his years of service in Congress he had taken all his pay to maintain his home and educate his children, nor had he to bear the burden of any social participation; whereas the Commissioners are compelled by the nature of their office to take prominent part in society.

Mr. Foster, of Illinois, reserved a point of order against the proposed increase of salary.

Mr. Burke declared that he did not know in all the country three men better qualified for their station than the Commissioners. He commended them as

men and as officials, saying there was less of politics and partisanship in their administration than any three men holding such high office. He did not regard their salaries as commensurate with the duties and responsibilities of their office, and thought they should get \$7,500.

Army Officers' Pay Contrasted.

Mr. Taylor, of Ohio, urged the proposed increase, declaring that the riches of the Commissioners should not be considered in determining the question of pay. He said the Engineer Commissioner has only his regular army pay, with about \$200 added by the government and the District. He knew of two engineer officers, both juniors to Maj. Judson, on detached duty, and both got more pay than the Commissioner. The Superintendent of Public Buildings and Grounds, only a major, gets the pay of a colonel, \$8,000 per year, while Maj. Kavanaugh, a junior major on detached service, gets \$2,000 per annum more than Maj. Judson. The District never had a better equipped and better organized board, and the pay given the first Commissioner thirty-two years ago is not sufficient for the present time.

Mr. Taylor read a letter from Mr. Shannon, a builder, who said he had erected more than 800 buildings in the District and had never either directly or indirectly been asked for a cent by way of commission or contribution. He said the speculative builders are victims of graft everywhere, save in Washington. He had had fourteen years' experience here and could speak knowingly of the honesty and efficiency of the District service.

Mr. Keifer suggested that the United States pays \$10,000 a year for the salary, while the District pays only \$100. He wanted to know why the District should not pay half. Mr. Taylor said he had no objection.

Increased Salary Stricken Out.

Mr. Mann knew nothing about the civil-ian Commissioners having been urged to accept, or of their having been in the hands of "their friends." But they accepted the office at a salary of \$5,000 and that should remain, though he had the fixing of the figure he would have made it \$7,500.

The chair struck the point of order and the \$6,000 amendment went out. On motion of Mr. Gardner the salary was then fixed at \$5,000.

When the paragraph appropriating \$1,500 for a model house for the building, they having held subordinate positions in the office in which vacancies were created.

"These gentlemen," said Mr. Burke, "need no vindication from those who know them. Their integrity and their devotion to their country have been proven too well in the past to permit a doubt to be raised regarding their conduct in this case." He said the bill will not contain these expressions without correction.

To Mr. Burke Mr. Bennett replied: "I am quite calm. There is no heat of the moment as far as I am concerned. When these Commissioners give a reply to the letter which I addressed to the President of the United States six weeks or two months ago, I will consider the rest of it."

At this point the debate drifted into a consideration of the question of assessments, but without further personal reference to the Commissioners, except that Representative Gardner made this statement:

"The thing that makes this a serious thing in this Congress, and for the District as well as the Congress, is that either by collusion with the assessors, or by instruction, the assessors are violating the law knowingly and purposely. If that is the case, it is not for the Commissioners to investigate. It is for the gentleman from New York either to make good or withdraw his charges."

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BENNETT ATTACKS THE COMMISSIONERS

Continued from Page One.

was that it related to the appointment of an assessor in absolute violation of law, and that having called the President's attention to the violation of the statute in writing, he was not in any particular hurry to take up other accusations until some attention was paid to that.

"The appointing of an assessor and the violating of a law in regard to assessments are very different things," interrupted Mr. Campbell, of Kansas.

Mr. Bennett then asked Mr. Bennett to indicate how the Commissioner had been able to put into effect the policy that the gentleman had just mentioned. If assessments in the District were made by an appointed board.

"Because the appointed assessors who have that same fixed idea," answered Mr. Bennett, "and that appointing of an assessor in violation of the law was what I called the attention of the President to in the letter which he referred to."

Insults Law Is Violated.

Pressed closely by Mr. Rothermel and others as to whether he believed the policy was fraudulently inaugurated, Mr. Bennett said: "I do not intend to characterize it. I said that the Commissioners, in my judgment, ought to carry out the laws Congress enacted. If they believed the other policy was the better policy, even if they were right, they had no right to inaugurate it until Congress enacted a statute."

Defended by Representative Burke.

Representative Burke, after conferring with Commissioner Johnston, made refutation of the Bennett charges. He said that he had been informed by the Commissioners that there was no difference among them with reference to the method of assessing property in the District of Columbia. Citing the fact that the assessors were appointed by the Board of Commissioners, he said the Commissioners held no influence or control over them whatever. The appointment of the two assessors named by the present Commissioners, he said, was made through promotion, they having held subordinate positions in the office in which vacancies were created.

"These gentlemen," said Mr. Burke, "need no vindication from those who know them. Their integrity and their devotion to their country have been proven too well in the past to permit a doubt to be raised regarding their conduct in this case." He said the bill will not contain these expressions without correction.

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CHARGE OF FAVORITISM.

I do not know how true the statement is that I am going to make, as it comes to me from other sources, but the information comes to me that although the law provides that the assessments shall be made on the basis of two-thirds of the actual value, yet in the cases of many influential real estate owners in the District of Columbia, the assessment is made as a matter of fact on less than 25 per cent of the actual value. Representative Madden, in House debate.

"Because the appointed assessors who have that same fixed idea," answered Mr. Bennett, "and that appointing of an assessor in violation of the law was what I called the attention of the President to in the letter which he referred to."

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